

HOMES

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Abbie Chan converted the spare toilet of her Mid-Levels flat into a wine cellar. When she's in there, she says, "It's like I'm sitting in a village in France." PHOTO: GUY AROZ

A lotta bottle

Wine collections are coming out of hiding as cellaring becomes a decorating art form, writes Peta Tomlinson

THE NOTION OF a wine cellar no longer means a dank, musty corner or a hide-hole under the stairs. Cellaring is now a decorating art form, adaptable to just about any space and budget, as wine lovers dust off their bottles and put them on show. The concept applies whether you like to keep just a few bottles on hand, or have a whole collection to store.

Restaurant designer Tony Chi shows how an open cellar can even be the focus of contemporary interior decor. At the Intercontinental Hotel Hong Kong's Spoon restaurant presided over by chef Alain Ducasse, chic refrigerated wine cabinets fashioned from glass and steel have pride of place at the entrance. Bottles are stacked and illuminated so they "twinkle like a glittering cave".

"As a wine and food aficionado, I love the idea of incorporating practical and attractive wine storage areas into interior design," says Chi, principal of Tonychi and Associates, New York. "It adds something to the whole dining experience."

Aesthetics aside, the cellar design at Spoon answers many of the challenges posed by the space, providing a balance, in glass, to the large windows. At the same time it's practical, allowing the wines to be displayed in ideal conditions.

Chi says that similar design principles can be applied at home, "provided the space is right and the money is available to do the design work properly". Glass and steel refrigerated wine racks, such as those in Spoon, might provide a stunning focus for a modern home, as long as they fit with the ambience of the place.

Wine lover Abbie Chan Sai-kit made the most of her space when she converted a spare toilet into a cellar in her Mid-Levels home. Eu-Amex Cellars were behind the design and construction, creating a cedar-lined cellar for 1,200 bottles with controlled temperature and humidity for about \$500,000. "I feel happy and comfortable in there," Chan says. "I feel transported – it's like I'm sitting in a village in France."

Australian oenophile Chris Miley, author of *How to Build Your Own Wine Cellar* (www.winecellarsecrets.com), says cellaring makes sense. "Many people are happy to pay good money for good wine, but they want to make sure it will be looked after. I know the wine I've lost over the years from poor cellaring would pay for the cost of several cellars today."

It's not just for the elite, Miley says. "From insulating that understairs space to installing wine racks made of Styro-

foam in the spare room, to temperature-controlled storage cabinets in the lounge room, to the most elaborate basement cellars you can imagine – there are many ways to help people care for their special wines. It's surprising how reasonable the cost is to start looking after your wines in a basic form. And, of course, those who can afford it like to show off. The simple truth is that, if you can afford to buy the wine, you can afford to cellar it."

Wine should be kept cool, moist and at a constant temperature. The ideal range is 13-15C, with the degree and speed of temperature change being critical. Although gradual changes of a few degrees between summer and winter won't matter, the same change each day will age your wines too rapidly. A dry atmosphere is the enemy of a natural cork seal. The ideal humidity level is 70 per cent, although anywhere from 50 to 80 per cent is acceptable. Ultraviolet light can also prematurely age a bottle of wine, as can vibration from machinery, noise or traffic, which may disturb the sediment.

Your cellar or storage area should also be kept clean and odour free – because strong outside smells can find their way through cork and contaminate the wine – well ventilated, and free from rodents that

might chew the corks and gnaw the labels. Miley advises picking an area that's away from an outside wall and preferably near the centre of your home. "Work out roughly how many bottles you think you will wish to cellar," he says. "You may find you don't need such a big area after all."

According to Sabrina Lee Tze-wan, manager of wine and accessories merchant Castle Fine Wine in Quarry Bay, nearly all the serious collectors in Hong Kong invest in a wine fridge to store the bottles they don't want to drink right away. Domestic models are available to

such as cabinets, coffee or hall tables include storage racks for bottles glasses – is also becoming a popular to display ready-to-drink wines in the smallest dining area. Pricerite hi compact cabinet in white oak woodgrain finish and glass, with storage for n bottles, for \$999.

For those who don't have the space conditions or budget to create a cellar home, there's always the option of Crc Wine Cellars. For as little as \$1 a bottle month (for long-term storage), the company keeps bottles in state-of-the-art

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hold as few as 30 bottles (the most popular size) or as many as 3,000. The top-selling brand names are Eurocave of France and Vintec of Denmark, with prices ranging from \$3,510 to more than \$16,000. The glass-door models are pricier but increasing in popularity because more customers choose them as a design feature of their living room, Lee says. A new wave of stylish "wine furniture" –

lars created from refurbished second world war bunkers.

"Our Cellars incorporate computerised climate-control systems, bar-code registration of every bottle, fully bonded cellars, same-day delivery of member wines anywhere in Hong Kong, a complete import/export service," Gregory De'eb, general manager, Crown Wine Division.